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**Historical Text and the Postmodern Aesthetic:
Case Study of Handmade Performance's *The Last Judgement***

'[P]ostmodern' is only superficially a style. On a deeper level, it is a multiple and decentered way of understanding the world and our own subjectivity. Instead of leading the audience towards a single dominating significance or interpretation, postmodern theatre, whatever its style, will be characterized by multiple tracks or channels, a demand that the audience respond to many 'texts' at once. There is a wonderful sense of theatrical density, bounty and playfulness in good postmodern work; it can be alive with not-quite-nailed-down associations, not-quite-cohered potentialities, formal, literary, political, social, sexual. Of course, critics have attacked postmodernism for just this tendency to dispersal: How can such work ever take up a political position? Yet postmodernism's very subversions of aesthetic unity, social hierarchy and the so-called 'dominant discourses' have an undoubted political potential...¹

On 20 June 1998, on the campus of Victoria College, University of Toronto, the theatre company Handmade Performance presented *The Last Judgement*, the last play in a production of the complete York Mystery Cycle produced by the Poculi Ludique Societas. Audiences witnessed a full-text version of the play – in the actor-friendly modernized text provided by the producers – but with innovations that were, it is safe to say, unexpected. The actor playing God wore a black leather jacket and played a hard-rock score on a hand-held 'boombox' as he spoke. At the same time, the Good and Bad Souls performed a dance-movement piece evoking images of death and resurrection, after which they interacted with the audience as if everyone present was a soul on trial. Two male actors dressed in white portrayed the Angels; they moved rhythmically with large gold-and-black cloths, standing along with their God high above the audience/souls. The Apostles doubled as the stage managers, handling prompt-script and spotlights from the edges of the performance space. The Devils entered from behind the audience, dressed in vaguely aristocratic twentieth-century costumes, playing a distorted church-organ music on their own 'boombox'. At the centre of the production was Jesus, whose dress

and movement was influenced by the oriental martial arts. He stood on the first level of the wagon, descending to the ground to speak to the Apostles, Souls/Audience, and turning to address some lines to God the Father standing high above him. At the end of the play he invited the Good Souls to join him on his level (of the wagon), after which he ascended to the upper level on a hand-operated lift.

The Last Judgement was generally well-received by audiences. They applauded vigorously at all four stations, and the company received extensive feedback after each performance, at the conference meeting the day after, through email, and in the pages of this journal.² Comments singled out the strong physical and vocal performances, and the use of lighting – in particular at the third station, where it cast giant expressionistic shadows on the surrounding buildings. Not all of the commentary agreed with the perceived interpretation of the text – nor should it. I believe it is reasonably safe to write here that the performance was strong, precise, professional, and in that sense was a credit to the text. It ‘worked as theatre’, as one commentator put it, who did not agree with much of the interpretation.³ The distinction – between what ‘works as theatre’ and a ‘justified’ interpretation – is significant, and warrants discussion.

The purpose of this article is to describe the interpretive procedures brought to bear on Handmade Performance’s production of *The Last Judgement*. The company is a theatre co-operative interested in exploring historical texts from the multiple viewpoints of a postmodern aesthetic and, not coincidentally, using the multiple skills of its participants in equal measure – visual art, choreography, musical composition, as well as direction and performance. The word ‘post-modern’ carries with it both positive and negative associations; perhaps the most salient feature of the aesthetic insofar as Handmade Performance is concerned, is the idea that the performance is the result of a collaborative and not a hierarchical rehearsal process, and that it illustrates a multiple, provisional set of interpretations which the audience will perceive as a diffuse and sometimes contradictory set of signs. The mandate of Handmade Performance is well-illustrated by its production of *The Last Judgement*.

There was a healthy discussion before and after this production of the York Cycle concerning the value of historical re-creation, as set against more radical re-interpretations of text. These two attitudes are too often distinguished as opposites, their relationship perceived as dialectic. In my opinion as both academic and director, this is a false dialectic that creates misperceptions and confusions which need to be addressed. Prior to the specific discussion of Handmade Performance’s interpretation of *The Last Judgement*, I will propose a set of four spectra, in an attempt to describe and relate these seemingly disparate

approaches to producing and receiving contemporary productions of historical texts. Needless to say, the following propositions are provisional. My wish is to generate discussion and to provide a context for the subsequent case study.

The Re-Creation/Re-Interpretation Spectrum

The first proposed spectrum locates the extent to which the contemporary production seeks to imitate the physical and vocal manifestation of a past performance. Toward one end of this spectrum lies the true historical re-creation, in which documentary evidence and scholarly conjecture are used in the design and execution of sets, costumes, blocking/choreography, and voice. Movement along the spectrum indicates an increasingly obvious manifestation in performance of the individual interpretations of those involved in the production. This interpretation manifests itself typically in the form of contemporary, historical, and theoretical analogy, brought to bear on design and acting style. To anyone reading this article, the distinction drawn by this spectrum may seem quite obvious. Nevertheless, I believe it is worth restating that the most rigorous attempt to re-create the original circumstances of production and the most radical dismissal of these circumstances are still connected on this continuum.

By definition, productions cannot exist on this continuum 'in extremis'. At the one extreme, the successful re-creation of an historical production, if fully realized, would be re-creating a complex of signs unreadable to a contemporary audience. Authentic pronunciation, historical meanings of words, gestures, relationships, imagery, all require an authentic historical audience to read and understand them. As soon as someone from the year 2000 witnesses the well-researched and well-crafted historical reconstruction, that witness misreads the event.⁴ The other extreme approaches what we might call 'radical re-interpretation', for which the written text and ancillary documentation are inspirational only, used as pretext for personal exploration in rehearsal; it is the exploration that is performed. In effect, those involved in the production are presenting their interpretation 'instead of' and not 'in conjunction with' the historical text. Such productions careen off the proposed spectrum, and can no longer be called performances of the text; they are all analogy.⁵

In practice, then, productions of historical texts all use more or less information about the original circumstances of production (even if only that embedded in the written text) in ways that are more or less mediated. We would do well to avoid perceiving these two intentions – to re-create, and to re-interpret – as Manichean manifestations of good and evil.

The following three spectra tend to temper, complicate, and distort this first, interpretational spectrum.

The Respect/Mockery Spectrum

This spectrum assesses the seriousness with which the creators of a contemporary production have treated the intentions of the original text/performance. In many cases this is an easy task; productions often make a mockery of the text. When this is intentional – and known to be – it can be enjoyed as parody. More often than we might like to think, however, a production is intended as a serious and respectful re-interpretation of the original, but it is ‘mis-read’ by an audience member as mockery. The complexity of this mis-reading can most efficiently be described by the example of Joanne Akalaitis’ New York City production of *Cymbeline* in 1989, which was aggressively attacked by the critics as a farce, or parody, of Shakespeare. Those who defended Akalaitis attributed her interpretation to a postmodern aesthetic, according to which she sought cultural analogies for each episode.⁶ The result was a production that used non-traditional casting, and reference to a wide array of historical periods and cultures – including costuming and accents ranging from Southern Appalachian to East-Indian. Also true to a postmodern aesthetic, the production did not have a unified vision, but instead mixed and matched interpretations as warranted. Such a ‘multi-channel’ interpretation perplexed those used to a strong unified interpretation of text – hence the harsh criticism from mainstream critics.

What is useful to our discussion from this example is that these critics considered Akalaitis’ attitude toward the text as insincere and derogatory, and considered the production a mockery of Shakespeare, when clearly nothing could have been farther from her intention. I draw attention to this complication because I believe it is at the root of the common argument that sets ‘re-creation’ in opposition to ‘re-interpretation’. There is a tendency to confuse aggressive interpretation with mockery because they both utilize many of the same stylistic devices – those of parody. Parody, after all, is a form of interpretation; indeed, discussion of the postmodern aesthetic tends to conflate these terms.⁷

This second spectrum, then, becomes an assessment of attitude toward the intentions of the original creators, at one end of which is respect and at the other is the mockery of parody. Both interpret the original text but in radically different ways. What becomes difficult is communicating to the audience where on this spectrum the production rests, so that confusion and the misinterpretation of tone can be avoided.

Tradition/Novelty Spectrum

Whereas the previous spectrum assesses creative intention, this spectrum situates audience expectation. Audience members go to the theatre with a complex of expectations based on education, popular and elite cultural influences, and the sum total of their other performance experience. At one end of the proposed spectrum are those elements of any production that reinforce the audience member's preconceptions of a 'traditional' or 'expected' production of the historical text – the way it 'ought to be performed'. At the other end of the spectrum are those elements of a production which disrupt the audience member's expectations, whether the reaction to that disruption is positive or negative. This relationship is complex and diverse. An American tourist at Stratford, Ontario, will have a very different set of expectations than (for example) an academic at a production of the complete York Mystery Cycle.⁸ My reason for positing this rather simple spectrum is that, in my opinion, it makes unexpected allies of the seeming disparate extremes of 'historical re-creation' and 'radical interpretation'. Aggressive interpretation by definition disrupts audience expectation; but most audiences are just as likely to be surprised by its 'opposite'. The fact is that most audiences do not go to the theatre expecting an historical re-creation of a text. Their expectations are not informed by that kind of knowledge but by the more recent history of theatre. A true re-creation is just as likely to be exotic to the audience as the use of authentically reconstructed instruments has been recently in musical concerts, or period style in dance performance.

This spectrum argues that both 'radical re-interpretation' and 'historical re-creation' are, in fact, allies. Both seek to reconfigure the contemporary audience's expectations, perceptions, and understanding. If they are allies, then the 'enemy', by this analogy, is the kind of production that reinforces a thoughtless, passive experience of the text-in-performance, that implies that all such performance is unaffected by history and culture, and that all productions are somehow 'the same'. However much producers of re-creations and radical re-interpretations may disagree, both side against this kind of essentialism.

Idealism/Pragmatism Spectrum

This last spectrum assesses the practical execution of any intended theatrical effect. At one end is the absolute ability to re-create the intention, whether that is a full-sized rolling pageant wagon, or a fully-realized contemporary lighting design. As one moves along the spectrum, one compromises.

Costumes become symbolic, whether the intention was historical accuracy or contemporary comment. Casts are reduced, blocking changed, technical effects curtailed, all depending on practical circumstances. Whether the intentions of the artists and scholars are historical re-creation or radical re-interpretation, serious exploration or parody, the fulfilment or the disruption of audience expectation, they always compromise with budgets, technology, time, and weather.

The complex of meanings generated by creators and audiences that I have outlined in this discussion will, I hope, be illuminated by the case study of Handmade's production of *The Last Judgement* – including to what extent practical compromise generates accidental meaning, in addition to and sometimes at odds with intended meaning .

Case Study of a Postmodern Aesthetic – *The Last Judgement*

A postmodern production tends toward the collective. This is not to say that, as a director, I do not have an interpretation of the text; indeed, I will have several. But it does mean that I am aesthetically and politically predisposed to incorporate the visions/interpretations of all the creators into the final production, wherever possible. The goal, as the quotation that begins this article notes, is a multiple point of view. The final form of the performance is dependent on that intention. That said, it is also true that the interpretations, however many there are, are always based on the text and its original context. What follows illustrates these goals, tempered by the kinds of concerns and limitations noted in the general discussion.

An Overall Conception – Imminence

The overarching idea that stimulated most of our creative interpretations of this script is that it is set in a kind of imminent future, and not in a biblical or medieval past. We surmised that original audiences knew – or were supposed by the church to believe – that the circumstances of this play could occur at any time. In fact, the play could be interrupted by the actual event it depicts – the Second Coming – even as it was being performed. Of course, it is just as appropriate to emphasize the future tense in this play – that it will happen, some day, and that the audience had better look to its religious health in the mean time. We made the decision to emphasize imminent, rather than a more distant futurity, believing it was historically and textually justified, because it was an unusual theatrical opportunity (how many plays treat subjects that are

'about to' happen?) – and because it is a terrifying thought. This idea allowed us to make a number of analogies.

Lighting and the Public Trial

The script dramatizes the last public trial on earth, and one clear analogy was drawn with contemporary televised trials – as if, when the time came, CNN would in fact report the judgement of all its viewers. Initially we envisioned several performers with video cameras and floodlights invading the space, focusing audience attention on specific individuals as they spoke – or as they tried to avoid judgement and the cameras. Practically, this was impossible, and the idea as a fully-realized unified interpretation was abandoned.

But in the theatrical process, ideas are rarely abandoned; and the legacy of 'the public trial' analogy was twofold. First of all, it left us with a means to light the last play of a long cycle, which was bound to be performed in darkness. Rather than light the performance simply because it was necessary – although that too is justified – this idea provided character, purpose, and physical structure to the lighting. In addition to this very practical result, the analogy of the public trial assisted the actors in their development of character. The actor playing God could think of himself as making a public declaration, as if at a news conference, or in a television sermon. The Bad Souls could think of the lights as paparazzi capturing their every embarrassed move, as something to be escaped, or to attack. The lighting alone would not have done this; the 'casting' of the lighting as 'live feed to CNN' created these opportunities.

Structural Blocking – The Order of the Universe in Microcosm

Based on a venue we knew would be a pool of light surrounded by darkness, and on the clear elevations and separations of the original text, we developed a rather aggressive symmetry in the blocking of this play. Above in the heavens stood God the Father with an Angel on each side. In front of the wagon, on a level with the audience, were two Good and two Bad Souls, who were instructed to consider their space divided in half. They could roam, of course, especially to hide from the lights; but as a rule of character and movement, they were to consider 'half' of the ground in front of the wagon as a confinement area, while they awaited judgement, and to consider everyone in the audience near them as other souls-in-waiting. In the audience, operating the lights, were three 'Apostles' symmetrically positioned. At the centre of this

obvious symmetry was Christ, the only character (until the end of the play) who inhabits the main stage of the wagon.

The most unusual aspect of this structure were the Devils, who were placed behind the audience, heckling and commenting on the action of the play in darkness, until they entered. This blocking strategy arose out of two visual interpretations of the pool of light. First of all, we defined hell in this case as the absence of God; and if God is the inspiration and creator of order in the universe, represented by the pool of light in which we performed, then hell is the surrounding darkness. But in addition, we were attempting to illustrate the idea that Lucifer and his Devils are not a part of the time or space of God's universe, and that their often comic-grotesque appearance and actions, and their never-quite-right imitations of humanity are all a result of, quite simply, not belonging.

Symbolic and Temporal Costuming

Practical as well as interpretational concerns influenced costuming, generally following the ideas generated by the structural blocking. Since we wished to emphasize the imminence of the dramatized event, and so the identification of the Good and Bad Souls (the Accused) with the audience, then modern dress became entirely appropriate. We used nothing aggressive; indeed, since these people were representative of humanity, they dressed in greys and blacks without any clear distinguishing fashion. We used one symbolic item of clothing to distinguish them, and we hope promote certain associations: long strings of fish-netting were wrapped around the bodies of all four Souls, to represent, among other possible interpretations, a shroud, and Christ and his apostles as 'fishers of men'. At the end of the production, the Good Souls join Christ on the wagon, and they are 'unwound'.

God and the Angels were intended to be purely symbolic in dress, as beings not a part of the world. The angels were dressed all in white, and God in black and white. This was contrasted to the devils, who were dressed in very specific, but random, historical costume – generally aristocratic and early twentieth-century. In their ill-fitting and inconsistent clothing, they did not suit the interpretation of the time frame as 'the present'; it was as if they had mis-identified the time period and, as usual, did not quite fit.

The pragmatics of costuming altered the interpretation, in retrospect. The nondescript costuming of the Souls, the symbolism of the fish-netting, and the inconsistency of the Devils' dress all had the effect we wanted. However, I question whether there is such a thing as a purely 'symbolic' costuming.

I suspect that all audience members perceive clothing as fashion, and historicize it. Whatever its symbolic impact, it is also 'medieval,' or 'Renaissance,' or 'seventies disco'. In general the two Angels and God looked as if they were dressed in contemporary clothing; Garrett Epp, for example, described the Angels as 'heavenly go-go boys', which was certainly not what we intended.⁹ I would not want to discount the potential significance of such an interpretation; but certainly it can be read as parody where none was intended, and can generate an unwanted reaction from the audience. This is, then, a good illustration of the accidental meaning that can be generated by the practical compromises of production – and by the multiple points of view in a postmodern production.

Pragmatic and Interpretive Casting

Several casting choices were made that altered the original and traditional performance practice of *The Last Judgement*. To some extent, these were pragmatic and resulted from the general experience of Handmade Performance. We believe that fewer but more experienced performers will do the script greater credit than a greater number of less experienced and uncontrolled performers; in such cases, we judge that moderate alterations of the script to allow for stronger performances is both appropriate and respectful. In this case we restricted ourselves to four Souls in total. They were given more room to move, and imagined the audience as a crowd of additional souls. We were also gender-blind in our casting, on the general principle that the strongest actors should be used in the most difficult roles.

Some casting, however, was non-traditional for reasons of interpretation as well as practicality. A third speaking Angel was cut, his lines divided between the other two. In part this eliminated one small role and increased the strength of two others; but it also helped to achieve the absolute symmetry discussed earlier. Similarly, we cast only three Apostles, who doubled as stage managers for the production. This choice made for a smaller, more disciplined, and more inclusive company; however, it also further emphasized the analogy of the 'staged' public trial, since they acted as the stage managers of the real and of the imagined event at the same time, reinforcing our idea of an imminent future.

Unlike (as just one example) the 1977 Toronto production of this play, for which one actor played both God and Jesus, we cast separate actors in the two roles. We wanted the audience to keep in mind the distinctly different attitudes of God the Father and God the Son toward humanity. The choice also allowed the two aspects of the godhead to interact, and to comment on and refer to one another. We believed this provided greater opportunity for

the actors to communicate the significance of their words to the audience. As I will discuss with respect to acting style, this did serve to complicate character. However, as one reviewer astutely pointed out, making this casting decision emphasized the absence from this play of any mention of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ We had also questioned this absence during rehearsal but could find no satisfactory theatrical means to identify it to the audience.

Movement as Spectacle

It was the job of the movement director for this production to find the contemporary equivalents for the text's spectacular and ritual/processional elements. Technical and casting restrictions prevented processions of Angels and Apostles, and the sight of souls rising from practical coffins. We were in any event sceptical of the impression these images would make on the contemporary audience, as compared with the original audience. We posited a sense of wonder, of ritual intent, and of terror that we did not believe we could recapture with numbers or special effects. Instead, the movement director substituted formal modern-dance movement, in particular for the Souls' resurrection. At the beginning of the production, during God's speech, the four Souls enter and create a mound of corpses, not unlike an image out of the Holocaust. As God and the Angels speak, they slowly rise from that mound and move rhythmically, with each other and with the figure of Christ. Only at the end of God's speech, when the Angels hastily and violently separate them into Good and Bad Souls, do they snap out of their formal, trance-like reverie, and become afraid. Christ moves to the wagon and waits for his entrance. This 'dance' was meant to illustrate God's narrative of Christ's kindness and self-sacrifice, to establish a relationship with Christ that would be revisited later in the play, as well as a relationship between God and Christ. Above all, it establishes what a formal procession of many more performers might have, that this is a play with strong ritual elements – a mystery.

A Complex Character at the Centre of the Universe

Medieval characters are not written to be complex in the way that twentieth century actors think of that word – psychologically. In many cases they have few lines and static movements that create an emotion, a moral position, or an historical presence for which the audience already knows the story. There is, nevertheless, a strength to even the smallest characters, and often a vestigial concern and contradiction that implies complex thought. The Good Souls

spend the play fearful of all around them, not quite aware of their status. The Bad Souls, by the fact that they speak at all, may be played as just deluded enough to believe they can escape hell. The God of this *Last Judgement* is a very angry figure, railing against his creation at length, emphasizing all the chances for redemption that humanity has squandered. This is the anger of a lost love, of extreme disappointment and bitterness. He is not an unemotional judge; and for that reason it is quite possible for a late-twentieth-century actor to create a complex role.

Not surprisingly, the central role of Jesus offered the most complex work by an actor. In the first place, this actor had an excellent training in traditional realist acting styles, and used these to develop what I believe was a strikingly complex interpretation of his character, which he communicated at length in rehearsal discussion. Following is a summary: This actor's Jesus clearly did not want to be on earth at this moment. He is that part of God that forgives, and that was instructed to experience extreme pain and death in his body in exchange for the souls of humanity. The judgement is neither his to make nor in his nature to make. The position he finds himself in is extremely uncomfortable; and this is one important reason for the characters of Father and Son to be separated. Jesus looks up at this Father when he first speaks, with anger and horror at what he has been sent down to do. He treats the Souls by turns with mercy and with disgust, expressing the complexity inside him with sudden and violent changes of attitude. He does not want to be in this position, and finds it difficult to control the obvious response, which is to blame everyone else. This actor's characterization of Jesus may be questioned on its historical and theological accuracy; but if Jesus was supposed to be humanized to the audience, then he had to be made into a character a contemporary audience could humanize – by creating a psychologically complex individual.

In addition to his realist training, the actor who portrayed Jesus is also a martial arts teacher and competitor. He himself raised the idea of using these skills in his performance; but he did not do so arbitrarily. The peaceable and merciful intention of the realist character he was creating, caught in a violent situation, led to a discussion of the differences between the Old and New Testament Gods and between eastern and western attitudes toward both religion and warfare. There was in this actor's understanding of Jesus an intention for forgiveness, peace, control, and strength that is far different from God the Father's statements of angry judgement and the rule of law. In this conception, Jesus' strength – and his style of movement – comes out of prayer, meditation, and the slow and controlled preparation for conflict. God and the Angels, by contrast, had tensed muscles, ready for an uncontrolled exhibition of brute

strength. In performance, then, while all around him are signs of western culture, Christ – like the Devils – does not quite fit. His dress is vaguely eastern, his wounds are created with red ribbons (an eastern stylistic device), and he moves differently from everyone else. He is a conflicted realist character on the one hand, with deep resentment toward his father and toward those he suffered to help. But he is also a mystical, otherworldly figure, someone clearly more merciful, more sympathetic than the present situation allows him to be.

I am quite prepared to argue that this interpretation is respectful of and appropriate to the original intentions of the text and context. More important to this discussion, however, is the work of the actor on this role. All parties bring to a rehearsal process their passions and understandings. Sometimes a pre-existing, unified directorial vision does not allow either passion or understanding to be communicated to the audience. Sometimes a more postmodern production does. Audience members left the performance talking about that character, and the eastern influences inherent in it. I believe it signified in ways I cannot assess, and most certainly could not have imagined prior to rehearsal. Above all, it committed to actor to the role.

Music and Audience Expectation

The composer for our production, like the actor who portrayed Jesus, found quite specific interests and passions in the text. To him, the story was about the exhibition of power, and the assumption of moral rightness, even in the face of damnation. His intention in composing the music was twofold. First of all, he wanted to emphasize the clear – and violent – authority of God in the heavens, and the false authority of the Devils in hell. But also, he wanted to question our assumption that what we believe is ‘appropriate’ is actually what God believes. To put it another way more specifically related to the text – he wanted to question the audience’s moral preconceptions by questioning their musical preconceptions. To this end, he made the relatively simple switch of having God’s appearance and speech accompanied by a heavy-metal-like score, and the Devils’ appearance accompanied by a distorted, tape-stretched cross between church-organ and classical music. The composer, in his defence of these decisions, said that he had always thought of the Devil as a classical music fan, interested in the class, the sophistication, and the order associated with it. God, on the other hand, being all-powerful, ‘can play anything He wants’.

The harsh, grating (and original) score played during God’s speech set the tone for the harshness of his words, and the violence of his demeanour. It effectively complemented the interpretation of that actor and the production

in general. Likewise, the distorted organ music added to our sense that the Devils were grotesques who couldn't quite imitate anything effectively – even religious music. As for the presentation of the music, the composer determined that he did not want non-synchronous music, emanating from outside of the play's universe. In all traditional and popular presentations, Angels tend to appear with their own instruments, as if it is a part of their character, something they never travel without. He wanted the music to be carried with and manipulated by the appropriate character, and to be a part of that character's manipulation of the world. This could have been accomplished with live musical instruments; however, in keeping with imminence and contemporary analogy, we chose portable recorded sound. With respect to the image of God, I can say that on the one hand, it greatly assisted the actor playing the role to have that instrument, and to manipulate its volume according to his displeasure with Christ's actions; this I believe was effective. On the other hand, holding a 'boombox' undermined the symbolic intention of his costuming; and, as I have already discussed, this provided a context that encouraged audiences to read the character differently than we intended. Such is the postmodern aesthetic.

Conclusion

From all indications, audiences appreciated these performances of *The Last Judgement*; however, despite the foregoing explanation of intention, it is reasonable to ask if it was really the 'multi-channel postmodern aesthetic' that they appreciated. I like to think so – that is, that intellectual and emotional contact was made. But, to be blunt, no contact can be made, with anyone about anything, without strong performers. The actors in this production had trained their voices to be able to be heard at the back of an outdoor venue, and had sufficient control over their bodies to be able to express emotion and visual imagery. They knew how to develop characters out of the unusual and sometimes difficult speech. They had training, in short, in how to communicate what we had discussed. That is the real secret to a successful production of an historical text; without it, the aesthetic is strictly academic, and never leaves the table.

I believe one final anecdote will emphasize this last point. Our Bad Souls always tried to drag members of the audience through hell-mouth with them. At the second station they engaged some children (perhaps eight to ten years old), who fought back vigorously and refused to be taken. At the conclusion of that performance, as we moved slowly to the next station, these two young girls ran up to the actor playing Jesus. One of them held her arm, and they were distraught.

'Those Devils hurt her arm,' one of them said. The other girl held out her arm.

The actor looked down at them solemnly, kindly, and after a pause said, 'Well – shall I fix it?'

'Oh, yes,' said the girls, 'could you, please?'

The actor playing Jesus reached down and touched the girl's arm. They thanked him and went on their way, relieved.

These astute members of the audience knew a powerful, unusual and sympathetic performance when they saw one. At this point, I confess, my postmodern directorial intentions are humbled somewhat.

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Notes

- 1 Elinor Fuchs, 'Misunderstanding Postmodernism', in *American Theatre* 6.9 (December 1989), 26.
- 2 David Bevington, 'Context and Performance: The York Plays at Toronto', *Early Theatre* 1 (1998), 148–9; Garrett Epp, 'Playing in All Directions: The York Plays, Toronto', *Early Theatre* 1 (1998), 151.
- 3 Epp, 'Playing in All Directions', 151.
- 4 Studies in popular culture, and in semiotics, emphasize the extent to which readers interact with texts; it can be argued in the theatre, in particular, that the work of art does not rest in the page, or even on the stage, but in the mind

of the witness. An accessible work on this subject is John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London, 1989), a popularization and distillation of other writings on semiotics, audience reception theory, and cultural studies, which posits the 'producerly' text as an object or event consumed by the audience, and virtually rewritten by them.

- 5 In no way do I intend to denigrate either extreme. On the contrary, I would consider both essential endeavours in the scholarly study of theatrical performance.

The attempted historical re-creation is the performative equivalent of the controlled laboratory experiment in the sciences and social sciences, and the re-creations of battlements and ships in experimental archaeology. It allows us to better understand how texts were staged and, beyond that, how those texts affected audiences and interacted with local culture. This is a long-standing intention in theatrical production, including Charles Kean, William Poel, Tyrone Guthrie, and efforts to reconstruct Shakespeare's Globe Theatre from Oregon to the South Bank; its value is obvious. It may even be powerful theatre, often exotic to the contemporary audience – the past being, after all, a foreign country.

Radical re-interpretation is more like the pure theory of theatrical production, and as such is just as essential to the understanding of the historical text. Jerzy Grotowski's work at the Polish Laboratory Theatre, for example, pushed the definition of 'interpretation' into the realm of 'translation', emphasizing that the words of the text are altered by the visual and aural context in which they are presented, and finally, in his 'laboratory' experiments, can be substituted by the theatrical image. His work tended to eliminate the written/spoken text wherever a correlative could be found; this was anathema to textual purists, but its point was precisely to explore and test that relationship, between written text and performative sound and movement. If it altered the historical text beyond recognition, and finally abandoned the original intention of the work – that is the nature of experiment. Many examples of such radical interpretation have been produced over the past thirty years, exploring historical texts from a variety of points of view, most recently with a focus on issues of gender and race. For any reader unfamiliar with this form, I would recommend an examination of the Wooster Group of New York City, whose deconstructions of canonical American plays is both fascinating and notorious.

- 6 Fuchs, 'Misunderstanding Postmodernism', 24–31; Nancy Graves, 'On the Design: Did Frank Rich Really Look?', 29; Harry Newman, 'On the Casting: Far from an Affront', 31; David Norbrook, 'On "Cymbeline" in the Canon: The Cold War Revisited', 27, all in *American Theatre* 6.9 (December 1989).

- 7 The works of Linda Hutcheon are instructive in this discussion, in particular her work *A Theory of Parody* (London, 1985; rpt 1991).
- 8 In most historical drama, in my experience, this complex of traditions is vaguely melodramatic. Most audiences of Shakespeare still consider the musical intonations, broad gestures, Victorian-illusionist costume, and illusionistic spectacle of the nineteenth century to be the status quo. This is a generality, of course, considering the bare-stage Brechtian influence on the production of historical texts during the past fifty years. But I still find a resistance to exactly this Brechtian influence in most audience members, who 'notice' the use of modern dress and (for example) Canadian accents as something different, 'not normal', even when used in ways theatre professionals and academics both consider innocuous. I think, for example, of the woman who sat beside me during a World-War-One costuming of *Henry V*, and lamented that no one produced Shakespeare any more the way it 'ought to be done'. She assumed that I knew what she meant; and I did.
- 9 Epp, 'Playing in All Directions', 151.
- 10 Epp, 'Playing in All Directions', 151.